Mental Health in Online Communities: How University Students Use Online Communities to Discuss Mental Illness

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ABSTRACT

Many students experience mental health issues while in university. Disclosing such issues, to a counselor, or friends and family can help cope with mental illness. Recent research found that it is also common for individuals to disclose mental health problems on social media. We collected mental health posts made by university students on online communities, and conducted a thematic analysis to investigate what students are posting about, and why they might be posting. We found that forum communities tended to have longer posts, usually disclosing mental health issues and asking for advice, while social media content focused on the negative impact of university on mental health, and lack of mental health support from universities. Replies to forum posts contained advice, while those to social media content offered support or empathy.

Keywords: Online communities, mental health.

Index Terms: H [Information Systems].

1 INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders are widespread across university campuses. Trying to balance school and work expectations, while managing other life activities can often lead to emotional and mental issues such as depression and anxiety [4]. Previous research has found that disclosing that one has a mental illness can be a way of coping with it [5]. Recently, research has focused on how social media is used to disclose these types of sensitive information, and the responses received from others (e.g., [1, 3, 6]). However, it is uncertain whether social media, and online communities in general, are helpful in coping with mental illness, or mainly used as an emotional outlet. Here, we investigate whether university students use online communities to self-disclose mental health problems, why they may do so, and how these disclosures are received by the communities.

We conducted an exploratory thematic analysis on data collected from online communities to investigate whether university students disclose mental health problems in online communities, and whether the content of their posts sheds any light on their reasons for posting and how it may help them with coping. We specifically targeted online communities in which people can make open posts and others can comment or provide feedback (e.g., Twitter, reddit).

2 RELATED WORK

University students are at a high risk of suffering from mental illness. Almost half (41%) of all university students, at one point or another, may experience symptoms that meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental disorder [7]. In addition, it has also been reported that the number of students with mental health issues appears to be on the rise [8]; more students now report and are diagnosed with illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder [2].

Recent research has also been investigating how mental illness is disclosed on social media platforms such as Instagram. For example, Manikonda & De Choundhury [6] and separately Andalibi et al., [1] examined mental health on Instagram. Manikonda & De Choundhury [6] examined how images posted on Instagram can disclose mental health issues, and found that there are several clues that we can look for to detect mental illness, such as color and visual cues. Andalibi et al. [1] on the other hand investigated how different types of mental health posts on Instagram receive varying positive and negative responses. They found that some comments were actually negative, and encouraged or supported harmful behavior. This highlights potential risks associated with disclosing mental health issues online.

Another online community in which people share their mental problems is reddit. De Choudhury and De [3] investigated how individuals self-disclose their mental state on reddit. Through linguistic quantitative analyses they examined the kinds of mental health discussions posted, what factors contribute to social support, and developed a language model to characterize support.

In this paper, we contribute to the existing literature by investigating (1) why individuals (in our case university students) may choose to disclose mental illness online (especially when responses can be negative), (2) if they do so on online communities other than social media, and (3) whether these disclosures and the responses received in return are beneficial to those impacted by mental illness.

3 METHOD

We originally planned to conduct an online survey with university students to investigate whether they disclose mental health information online, and how and why they choose to do so. However, initial exploration into this area indicated the need for preliminary research on the ways and extent to which students self-disclose mental health in online communities. This research is a first step in that direction. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of mental health posts by university students found in a variety of online communities to observe how interactions take place, the types of responses received, and whether those responses, or the mere act of posting, may help individuals' mental health.

3.1 Procedure

During three weeks in March 2017, we collected all of the posts from online communities that met the following criteria:

Poster is a university student – the post either indicates this explicitly, or implicitly through talk about university or college.

Post's focus is mental health – we only included posts which had mental health issues as their main focus (as opposed to posts that merely mentioned mental health).

Post is public – so that we could get access to it.

To find posts we searched a variety of online communities, including Twitter, reddit, Facebook, Tumblr, and online support

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and discussion forums found through Google. We found the posts through keyword searches containing a subset of the words "college," "university," "student," "depression," "anxiety," "bipolar," etc. For communities containing tagging systems (e.g., '#'), those keywords were also searched for as tags.

We then conducted a qualitative thematic analysis, where we grouped posts according to categories that emerged from the data. We also analyzed the content of the comments, likes, shares, and votes provided in response to the original posts.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In a three-week period, we found 74 posts containing personal mental health information or disclosures in a variety of online communities. The majority of posts found were from the Twitter and reddit online communities. No posts were from Facebook and Tumblr, likely due to privacy settings. A small amount of posts was found in other online forum and discussion communities, these posts however had not been posted within the three-week period. We chose to include posts from these communities, as long as they were from the same calendar year, because they did not seem to be different from others found within our time period. Had these posts not been included, the comparison would have only been between Twitter and reddit, and our intent was to compare a number of different communities as long as they possessed the correct content.

4.1 Differences in Online Community Platforms

Several themes emerged from our initial exploratory thematic analysis. One main theme was that there was a fairly distinct relationship between the online communities and the nature of the posts. For example, forum and discussion communities tended to have posts asking for advice and disclosing mental health information, rather than any other categories. Social media content (in this case Twitter) on the other hand, had more posts related to the lack of mental health support from their institution, how university affects mental health, and self-disclosing personal mental health issues.

While social media posts were more humorous, or tried to downplay mental health issues (see Figure 1), and did not usually ask for advice, forum posts were much longer (likely due to an unlimited amount of allowed characters) and more detailed. Most of the forum posts collected contained detailed information about the individual's mental health condition, and often times relayed much of their life story. In this sense, forum posts also contained much more sensitive, and sometimes disturbing, information (such as self-harm or suicide plans).

Figure 1. Twitter post downplaying mental health issues.

4.2 Reponses to Mental Health posts

While almost all of the forum posts received comments, only a handful of the social media posts did. Both, however, received other types of recognition, such as likes, sharing, and up-votes (all posts had some type of recognition). All but one forum posts with comments contained at least one comment providing advice, even if the post did not ask for any type of advice. Social media posts however rarely received advice, but more often comments relating

to the poster's situation, some self-disclosing mental health problems, and others offering support. Forum comments sometimes asked for clarification, while social media comments did not.

An interesting observation we obtained from this data is that, except for one forum poster, only social media posters openly acknowledged comments provided by others. Out of all of the posts we obtained, only one forum poster thanked a commenter for their advice and support, while a handful of social media posters thanked their commenters.

While most comments were positive and supportive, some of the comments provided in response to posts were of a negative nature, either questioning the original poster about statements they had made, or sharing a sense of hopelessness about the current situation (see Figure 2). These comments however were only found in reddit posts asking for advice. No other occurrences of negative comments were present in any of the other online communities.
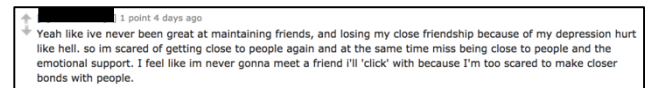

Figure 2. Reddit comment empathizing with poster.

4.3 Why post on online communities?

There may be a number of reasons why individuals, in this case university students, may talk about mental health in online communities. Our research suggests that asking for advice might be one of the reasons students self-disclose mental health issues on online communities, especially on forums. In addition, online communities allow individuals to hide their identities, so it might be a good place to vent, or get others to interfere (for example, hoping to be convinced to not take drastic measures).

5 CONCLUSION

Many university students experience mental illness, and choose to disclose it on online communities. In this paper we presented our initial investigation into mental health disclosures of university students on online communities. We found that forum content usually disclosed mental health issues and asked for advice, while social media content was not as detailed. This research showcases the need for a formal inquiry into why university students choose to make such posts, and how communities could help support them.

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